13 September 2006
English
Original: Spanish

Committee on Conferences
Substantive session of 2006

Draft report

Addendum

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V. Translation- and interpretation-related matters

Introduction and overview

1. At its 478th and 479th meetings, on 13 September 2006, the Committee considered the report of the Secretary-General on the pattern of conferences, section V, concerning translation- and interpretation-related matters (see A/61/129, paras. 68-69, "Workload standards"; paras. 70-72, "Self-revision"; and paras. 81-86, "Quality of language services and qualified language staff"). In introducing the report, the Under-Secretary-General drew particular attention to the statement of the executive session of the 2006 International Annual Meeting on Language Arrangements, Documentation and Publications (IAMLADP) held at Vienna in June 2006, which had expressed concern that conference and language professionals possessing the high level of expertise and experience required by international organizations were in short supply on the commercial market and had concluded that investment in the training of language professionals should be accorded high priority.

2. Representatives of conference services at the United Nations Offices at Geneva, Vienna and Nairobi participated via videoconference in the 478th meeting of the Committee, on 13 September 2006, and discussed the theme of quality of services and client satisfaction.

Nairobi

3. The Chief of Conference Services at Nairobi said that, since the United Nations Office at Nairobi was dependent for roughly 50 per cent of its funding on extrabudgetary resources, conference services there had a different modus operandi and a different approach to quality than the other duty stations. The extrabudgetary clients could stipulate the level of service they wanted and often, for reasons of cost

or speed, chose to do without editing and revision. They might also request documentation to be issued later than six weeks prior to publication in order to be able to incorporate the most up-to-date information.

4. It should be recognized that quality came at a cost. The Office outsourced 30 per cent of its work, and there was no doubt that outsourcing had an impact on quality, since it was rarely possible to revise the work in-house; at most, it could be spot-checked for format and certain terminology. Nevertheless, the Office usually worked with the same freelance translators, who were experienced in the environmental subject areas that Office dealt with.

5. While local freelance translators were available, there were very few qualified local freelance interpreters. For major sessions it was necessary to borrow interpreters from other duty stations, although interpreters at Nairobi, who met the global standards of the Organization, often worked at other duty stations during slow periods at home. The Office lacked professional-level editing staff, but had high-level General Services text-processing staff who were also involved in proofreading, building databases and referencing. In order to improve quality, there was a great need for a training facility in Africa, like the one that had been operated from 1978 to 1984 at the Economic Commission for Africa, to train translators and interpreters in international conference work. That need had been recognized by representatives of the European Commission at the IAMLADP meeting, and help from the European institutions might be forthcoming in setting up such a facility again at some location in Africa.

6. With regard to client satisfaction, the United Nations Office at Nairobi had the best possible proof in that its extrabudgetary clients, who were not obliged to use its services, continued to come back. In addition, it used post-session surveys, but found that the results tended to be slanted by the successful or unsuccessful outcome of the meetings, extraneous to conference services. Nairobi therefore had a practice of contacting the secretariats of its client bodies directly and had heard no complaints about conference services other than those regarding the physical limitations of the Nairobi facilities. It also made a practice of meeting directly with the States members of its main client organizations. Indeed, because of its charge-back system, Nairobi had become a flexible, client-oriented organization.

Geneva

7. The Director of Conference Services in Geneva said that some of the mechanisms used in Geneva to measure client satisfaction included meetings of the Director-General with regional groups, information meetings held twice a year between conference services and the missions, client satisfaction surveys and a thanks and complaints file in which all such letters were compiled for analysis. Conference services in Geneva found it indispensable to maintain an ongoing dialogue with clients and therefore had nearly monthly meetings with its most regular clients, such as the Human Rights Council, the Economic Commission for Europe and the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development. Outsourcing was done with client agreement.

Vienna

8. The Chief of Conference Services at Vienna said that quality was an essential feature of the products and services provided to clients, covering such factors as accuracy, readability, consistency, suitability for the end purpose and uniformity across languages. A matrix of criteria determined the risk that could arise if the quality of a product was not adequate, including its political, diplomatic and legal importance and sensitivity, its intended circulation and the lifetime the document was expected to have, especially if it was placed on the Internet. There were indeed different levels of quality, generally described in such terms as poor, good, high, excellent, and so on, yet it was hard to imagine a client or user who would be willing to accept a "poor" level of quality. Conference Services and the client must come to an agreement on compromises regarding the level of quality in return for speed. He noted, however, that clients tended not to notice or appreciate quality until there was a deterioration. It must also be acknowledged that quality came at a cost: revision was one of the best ways of ensuring quality of translation and reducing errors, but it was costly and time-consuming.

9. However, more went into quality than revision. Since the quality of the manuscripts submitted by author departments had such a strong impact on the quality and cost of documents and their timely issuance, Conference Services at Vienna, with the support of Headquarters in New York, was implementing a pilot editorial outreach project, which would include a help desk to provide online or phone support to authors, an online course for report writers and a template that drafters would be asked to use when starting a new report. Other practices aimed at improving quality involved drafting and consistency groups comprising translators, delegations and experts; pre- and post-session discussions with the secretariats of the calendar bodies, with the participation of translators and interpreters, to review terminology and other language quality issues.

10. Since it was planning a strong increase in outsourcing, Vienna aimed to maintain a core staff able to ensure the quality of external translations and to reclassify a post in each language section as a P-5 senior reviser responsible for quality control and the training of external translators, while a P-4 post in all languages would be responsible for information technology and computer-assisted translation tools in addition to translation duties.

11. With regard to interpretation, Vienna had only 20 interpreters and was obliged to hire an equal number of freelancers if more than one set of meetings was being held at a time. The utilization rate was nearly 90 per cent. Recruitment of non-local freelance interpreters was frequent, since few qualified interpreters were available locally. While there were no complaints about the regular interpreters, the International Atomic Energy Agency, which used roughly 40 per cent of the interpretation services, had raised the issue of interpretation quality in relation to freelancers. In general, the subject matter dealt with in Vienna was highly technical and on-the-job training was necessary for high quality. An additional 10 interpretation posts would go far to alleviate the situation.

12. The client was the final judge of the usefulness of the product but was not always in a position to judge the accuracy of a translation or interpretation. Consequently, client surveys provided only a partial indication of quality, especially since the response to surveys was typically poor. Since shorter surveys yielded a greater response, Vienna had simplified the survey prepared in New York; it planned

to put a basic questionnaire on document quality on every copy distributed in the conference rooms and to develop a similar pop-up window for the website that provided access to documents issued in Vienna.

Discussion

Nairobi

13. The Committee welcomed the reduction in the vacancy rate in interpretation posts but expressed concern about the persisting difficulty in filling Arabic interpretation posts and the slow process of filling the newly created P-3 information technology post. Delegations queried the reasons for departures from the six-week document issuance rule but were assured that it responded to client requests. A number of members encouraged Nairobi to quantify what resources or conversions of posts to regular budget would be needed to increase quality.

14. With regard to the information technology post, the Committee was told that in the absence of qualified internal or external candidates, Nairobi was canvassing other duty stations to see if a qualified person could be loaned for one or two years. The representative of conference services in Nairobi, on request, promised to supply a list of the main clients and the proportion of services they received. With regard to the difficulties of filling interpretation vacancies, he explained that the post structure at Nairobi, which did not provide opportunities for advancement, was a factor and that the low utilization rate for interpreters, which meant that they had to travel frequently, was another deterrent to recruitment. The rate could not easily be increased, since Nairobi had reached its physical meetings capacity limit. Nairobi had benefited from an increase in its regular budget in real terms in the past few years, but extrabudgetary funding had also increased, so that it still represented half of funding.

Geneva

15. In response to questions, the representative of Conference Services at Geneva said that the overall level of client satisfaction with conference services in Geneva was good. It was true that as the Human Rights Council struggled to establish its modus operandi it was requesting many after-hours and weekend meetings and last-minute documents, straining the normal system, but difficulties would eventually be smoothed out. Thanks to the intervention of the then Assistant Secretary-General for General Assembly and Conference Management, many issues had been resolved with the Joint Inspection Unit, which had reduced the number of requested waivers.

Vienna

16. Interest was expressed in the editorial outreach project, which, once developed, could be used by other duty stations. It was questioned whether the proposed translation post structure would be adequate to ensure the quality of external translations. It was noted that in the hiring of temporary staff on the local market the different languages were not treated equally, but it was explained that the availability of local qualified freelancers differed from language to language. Questions were raised about the possibility of the participation of the International Atomic Energy Agency in finding funding for new interpretation posts. In response to questions, the representative of Conference Services at Vienna outlined some of

the information technology applications that were being developed in Vienna, including management reporting, meetings planning and servicing and documentation processing systems; Vienna was currently using e-Meets instead of the older Documents Control and Productivity Monitoring System (DCPMS) module, and the Vienna-developed e-APG system for interpreter assignments was being used at all other duty stations.

17. The view was expressed that the success of intergovernmental negotiations often depended on the quality of the translation and interpretation into all six official languages. However, quality was predicated on the provision to all the language services of equally favourable working conditions. There appeared to be inequality in particular from service to service in the recruitment of local and non-local temporary assistance. The practice of recruiting short-term language staff for certain language services on a local basis, regardless of their actual domicile, for the sake of financial savings, represented unequal treatment and could compromise the quality of conference services.

18. Concern was expressed about the shortage in qualified language staff that could result from the demographic changes in the language services combined with the decline in the number of applicants for United Nations language examinations in recent years, and the need for a plan to deal with the problem was stressed. On learning that the Under-Secretary-General was planning to accompany representatives of the European Commission on a visit to some universities in the United States of America in an attempt to reverse the apparent decline in interest in language study, delegations expressed support for outreach to universities to promote the training of language professionals in all countries where United Nations official languages were used. It was suggested that the experience of the centre set up by the Government of the Russian Federation to train translators and interpreters for international conference work could be helpful to others. The representative of the Secretariat assured the Committee that outreach efforts would encompass all official languages and noted that candidates trained at the Moscow centre had demonstrated excellent professional skills in the recent language examinations.

19. In response to questions about why recent language examinations had not resolved the vacancy situation, a representative of the Secretariat said that not only were there fewer applicants but that they had also displayed an observable decline in writing skills. The Office of Human Resources Management had capacity to organize only a certain number of examinations per year. Perhaps the time was coming to ask the General Assembly for a different pattern of exams. Although some unusual measures, such as offering retirees a chance to be rehired if they were willing to forego pension benefits, were being contemplated to meet the anticipated shortage, in general it was the policy of the Organization to minimize any extensions after retirement age. With regard to mobility, the Secretariat believed that the mobility policy in its full version would be impractical for the language services, owing in part, as Committee members had pointed out, to the special skills and knowledge needed in certain places. The Department had put forward positive proposals to involve language staff in mobility as much as possible without disrupting service at the duty stations.

20. In response to requests for clarification about the comprehensive methodology for performance measurement and management from a full-system perspective, mentioned in paragraph 69 of the report (A/61/129), a representative of the

Secretariat explained that the Department was attempting to replace a one-dimensional approach to performance measurement by developing an array of indicators on timeliness, quality, financial performance and client satisfaction. In response to questions about follow-up to complaints, he said that verified mistakes were brought to the attention of the translator or interpreter concerned with the intention that it should be a learning experience.

21. A concern was raised about a statement made during a language-specific meeting that the opinions of the chiefs of booth in the interpretation services concerning the quality of the work of the staff were frequently ignored. The assurance was given that the assessment of the chief of booth was taken very seriously in determining the qualifications of temporary staff, although the chief of service reserved the right to hire an interpreter on a provisional basis in case of urgent need, even if the chief of booth's opinion was somewhat unfavourable.